

Message Text

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S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 SAIGON 13059

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: XGDS 1, DECLAS 12-31-85
TAGS: PINT, VS
SUBJECT: REACTION TO PRESIDENT THIEU'S SPEECH AND CONTINUING
OPPOSITION ACTIVITY

REF : SAIGON 12026

1. IN HIS SPEECH ON OCTOBER 1, PRESIDENT THIEU SEEMS TO HAVE MADE LITTLE PROGRESS IN RALLYING HIS OWN FORCES WHILE GIVING THE EXTREMIST OPPOSITION SOME SPECIFIC POINTS WITH WHICH TO RENEW THEIR ATTACKS. THE SPEECH WAS LONG AND LARGELY EXTEMPORANEOUS. THE GENERAL CONSENSUS, HOWEVER, WAS THE THE PRESIDENT'S DELIVERY WAS LESS EFFECTIVE THAN USUAL.

2. DESPITE THE SPEECH'S CONCILIATORY TONE, A COMMON REACTION WAS THAT IT WAS A REHASH OF OLD ARGUMENTS, THAT IS CONTAINED NOTHING NEW, THAT IT DEALT WITH GENERALITIES OR LESS IMPORTANT MATTERS. THE SPEECH, IN FACT CONTAINED AN EXTRAORDINARILY FRANK LITANY OF THE PROBLEMS FACING SOUTH VIETNAM. THE PRESIDENT OUTLINED A GLOOMY ECONOMIC PICTURE AND A LESS FAVORABLE MILITARY SITUATION, BOTH COMPOUNDED BY SHARPLY FALLING US AID LEVELS. THIEU CALLED FIRST FOR THE DEFENSE OF THE COUNTRY AGAINST COMMUNIST ATTACK AND SAID THAT OTHER SOCIAL PROBLEMS COULD ONLY BE DEALT WITH FULLY ONCE THE COUNTRY HAS SURVIVED THE COMMUNIST THREAT. BUT HE WAS SPEAKING IN THE CONTEXT OF RENEWED OPPOSITION ACTIVITY, INCLUDING CHARGES OF CORRUPTION AIMED AGAINST HIM PERSONALLY; AND A COMMON REACTION WAS TO SEE MUCH OF THE SPEECH AS IRRELEVANT.

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3. A NUMBER OF POINTS IN THE SPEECH HAVE BEEN SEIZED ON FOR PUBLIC OR PRIVATE COMMENT, IN PARTICULAR THE VAGUE LAST SENTENCE WHERE, CITING, AS HE DID THROUGHOUT THE SPEECH, THE SPECTRES OF THE COLONIALIST SABOTEURS, FALSE PACIFISTS, COMMUNISTS AND COMMUNIST LACKEYS, HE CLOSED WITH:

"AND IF ALL THE PEOPLE AND ARMED FORCES NO LONGER TRUST ME, PLEASE, COMPATRIOTS AND BROTHERS AND SISTERS, LET ME KNOW."

4. IN RESPONSE, SEVERAL EXTREMIST OPPOSITION LEADERS HAVE CALLED FOR PRES THIEU'S RESIGNATION. THESE INCLUDE CATHOLIC OPPOSITION SEN THRUONG TIEN DAT (WHO HAD PREVIOUSLY MADE THE SAME DEMAND), THE LOWER HOUSE PEOPLE'S SOCIAL BLOC (27 DEPUTIES) OF TRAN VAN TUYEN (WHO HAD PREVIOUSLY CALLED FOR IMPEACHMENT PROCEEDINGS), MEMBERS OF LOWER HOUSE NATIONAL GROUP OF NGUYEN VAN BINH (BLOC MEMBERS HAD PREVIOUSLY CALLED FOR RESIGNATION OR IMPEACHMENT), AND NATIONAL RECONCILIATION FORCE (NRF) OF SEN VU VAN MAU, WHO IS REMEMBERED FOR HAVING CALLED FOR THE PRESIDENT'S RESIGNATION AT THE HEIGHT OF THE 1972 NVA OFFENSIVE.

5. SINCE PRESIDENT'S CLOSING REMARK CAN BE READ AS CALL FOR EXPRESSION OF NATIONAL CONSENSUS, THERE HAS BEEN MUCH COMMENT ON HOW THIS WOULD BE ACHIEVED. SEN DAT SEES THIS AS REQUIREMENT FOR ABOLITION PRESS CENSORSHIP. DEPUTY NGUYEN TRONG NHO CALLS FOR REFERENDUM, A DEVICE EMB SOURCES SUGGEST PRES THIEU HAS ALSO CONSIDERED. FR. TRAN HUU THANH, LEADER OF PEOPLE'S ANTI-CORRUPTION MOVEMENT (PACM) ANNOUNCED PLAN TO CONTINUE DEMONSTRATIONS TO LET PRESIDENT HEAR "WILL OF THE PEOPLE".

6. WHILE DIFFICULT JUDGE PUBLIC IMPACT, PRES THIEU'S FREQUENT REFERENCE TO COMMUNIST READINESS TO MAKE USE OF AND INFILTRATE PROTEST MOVEMENTS WAS RESENTED BY OPPOSITION LEADERS. RESPONSIBLE OPPOSITION SUCH AS SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC ALLIANCE (SDA) LEADER NGUYEN NGOC HUY OR BUDDHIST SEN TRAN QUANG THUAN PRIVATELY CRITICIZE PRESIDENT'S REMARKS AS RENEWED EVIDENCE HIS UNWILLINGNESS ACCEPT AND WORK WITH RESPONSIBLE OPPOSITION GROUPS.

7. THE OPPOSITION HAS ALSO REMARKED ON WHAT THEY CALL PRE SECRET

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THIEU'S "CRITICISMS OF THE AMERICANS" PROFESSING TO FEAR THIS WILL IRRITATE US CONGRESS FURTHER OR READING PRESIDENT'S REMARKS AS SIGN OF DETERIORATING RELATIONS WITH UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT. PRO-GOVT LOWER HOUSE CHRMN NGUYEN BA CAN, ON THE OTHER HAND, TOLD US THAT GVN IN REAL TROUBLE OVER MILITARY AND ECONOMIC AID CUTS AND MUCH OF THIS PART OF SPEECH ADDRESSED PRIMARILY TO AMERICAN CONGRESS AND PEOPLE.

8. ON THE QUESTION OF PERSONAL CHARGES OF CORRUPTION, PRES THIEU DENIED THESE CHARGES COMPLETELY, INVITED ANYONE TO BRING FORTH FACTS AGAINST HIM AND VOWED TO ACT AGAINST ANY MEMBER OF HIS FAMILY WHEN NECESSARY. THE OPPOSITION PUBLICLY HAS MADE MUCH OF PRESIDENT'S SLIP IN SAYING "DEFAMATORY ALLEGATIONS ARE IN FACT EXAGGERATIONS AND PURE FABRICATIONS", CLAIMING THIS SHOWED PRESIDENT ADMITTED SOME CORRUPTION, THOUGH CONTEXT MAKES IT CLEAR THIS NOT THE CASE. PRESIDENT'S REFUSAL "TAKE UP CHARGES OR PLEAD FOR MYSELF" LEFT MANY DISSATISFIED. LOWER HOUSE CHRMN CAN AND OTHER PRO-GOVT LEADERS HAVE POINTED OUT, HOWEVER, THAT IF PRES THIEU ATTEMPTS DEAL PUBLICLY WITH DETAILS OF SPECIFIC CHARGES, HE IS PLACED ON DEFENSIVE, APPEARS WEAK, AND INVITES CONTINUING BARRAGE OF NEW UNFOUNDED CHARGES IN INDICTMENTS 2, 3, 4, ETC. WE BELIEVE THIS IS ALMOST CERTAINLY JUST WHAT EXTREMISTS WOULD DO.

9. PRESIDENT'S ANNOUNCEMENT OF CHANGES AND DISMISSALS IN PROVINCE CHIEF AND OTHER POSITIONS IN RECENT WEEKS, INCLUDING REDUCTION IN RANK OF TWO GENERAL OFFICERS, HAS NOT SATISFIED MANY OPPOSITION LEADERS WHO ARGUE THAT CHANGES MUST BE MADE CLOSE TO THE TOP, INCLUDING SOME CORPS COMMANDERS. (RUMORS ARE CIRCULATING THAT SOME CHANGES OF THIS SORT ARE IMMINENT.)

10. FINALLY, REACTION TO PRESIDENT'S PLEDGE TO ATTEMPT ELIMINATE CORRUPTION IN THREE MONTHS OF CIVIL SERVICE AND NATIONAL POLICE AND PROBLEM OF "GHOST" AND "FLOWER" SOLDIERS IN MILITARY BY NOV 1 MET NOT ONLY BY SCEPTICISM AMONG PUBLIC BUT CERTAIN MEASURES OF CONSTERNATION AMONG CABINET WITH WHOM HIS REMARKS WERE NOT CLEARED.

11. IN ONE NOTABLE PASSAGE PRES THIEU MADE CONCILIATORY ANNOUNCEMENT THAT DL-007 (PRESS) AND DL-060 (POLITICAL PARTIES) WOULD BE AMENDED. PRESS HAS DOWNPLAYED THIS PROMISE,
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TREATING IT WITH SCEPTICISM OR AS OF LITTLE CONSEQUENCE. PROFESSOR HUY TOLD EMBOFFS THAT THIS WAS "TOO LITTLE AND TOO LATE." PRO-GOVT NATIONAL ASSEMBLY LEADERS HAVE MADE IT CLEAR TO EMBASSY, HOWEVER, THAT THEY INTEND EARLY ACTION TO AMEND (LIBERALIZE) THESE LAWS, AND IT IS CLEAR THIS CAN HAVE IMPORTANT EFFECT ON GROUND RULES FOR 1975 ELECTIONS. WE ALSO UNDERSTAND THAT PRES THIEU HAS INDICATED TO CVT LEADER TRAN QUOC BUU WILLINGNESS AMEND OR RESCIND RESTRICTIONS ON RIGHT TO STRIKE IN DL-004. THUS, THREE OF MOST CONTROVERSIAL OF DECESS LAWS ISSUED UNDER 1972 FULL POWERS ACT LIKELY TO BE AMENDED IN RESPONSE TO OPPOSITION CRITICISM.

12. WHILE PRESS CONTINUES VERY ACTIVE IN PROTEST MOVEMENTS AND FULL OF CRITICISM OF GOVT, EMPHASIS ON PRESS FREEDOM CAMPAIGN ITSELF HAS EASED SLIGHTLY, AND THERE HAVE BEEN ONLY TWO

CONFISCATIONS SO FAR THIS MONTH. EARLY AMENDMENT DL-007 CAN BE EXPECTED, BUT PREPUBLICATION REVIEW BY GOVT WILL LIKELY BE RETAINED. THIS WILL BE DISPUTED BY OPPOSITION PRESS, BUT MAJORITY PRESS COMMUNITY PROBABLY ACCEPTS NEED, UNDER PRESENT SECURITY SITUATION, FOR SOME CONTINUING CENSORSHIP. PROBLEM IS WIDESPREAD DISLIKE MININFO HOANG DU NHA AND OPPOSITION

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S E C R E T SECTION 2 OF 2 SAIGON 13059

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TO WHAT PRESS CONSIDERS HIS ARBITRARY USE OF CENSORSHIP POWER. SEVERE CRITICISM OF NHA HAS LONG EXISTED AMONG PRO-GOVT AS WELL AS OPPOSITION LEADERS.

13. FR. THANH'S PACM HAS CONTINUED TO AVOID STREET DEMONSTRATIONS SINCE SEPT 8 CONFRONTATION IN HUE. OBVIOUSLY, CHURCH OFFICIALS DISCOURAGING SUCH DEMONSTRATIONS, AND BOTH CHURCH AND GOVT DESIRE AVOID FURTHER CONFRONTATIONS. PACM HAS SHIFTED TO MASS MEETINGS, CONFINED TO CHURCH GROUNDS, AT WHICH FR. THANH OR OTHER PACM PRIEST PREACHES ANTI-CORRUPTION SERMON AND DEMANDS PRES THIEU ANSWER CHARGES. LATEST SUCH MEETING IN SAIGON SUBURBS OF TAN BINH, GIA DINH PROVINCE ON OCT 6 NUMBERED 3,000 PARTICIPANTS, WAS ORDERLY AND LED TO NO INCIDENTS.

14. THOUGH PACM TACTICS REMAIN DAMPED DOWN, PUBLIC POSITION MOST CATHOLIC LEADERS REMAINS DETERMINEDLY UNCLEAR. THUS, MANY LOCAL PRIESTS AND POLITICANS ARE INTERPRETING RECENT STATEMENT ARCHBISHOP BINH AS ENDORSEMENT PACM AIMS AND TACTICS. WE BELIEVE, HOWEVER, ARCHBISHOP SIMPLY RESPONDING TO NEED COMPENSATE FOR EARLIER MEDIA EFFORTS BY GOVT PORTRAY BINH'S POSITION AS AGAINST PACM IN ORDER MAINTAIN IMAGE NEUTRALITY.

SIMILARLY, WHILE LILY BLOC SEN NGUYEN DUC QUY HAS ASSOCIATED HIMSELF WITH NEW MOVEMENT AGAINST HUNGER, REMAINDER OF BLOC HAS STAYED SILENT. WE ARE INFORMED THAT BLOC MEETS REGULARLY TO ASSESS IMPACT CURRENT EVENTS ON POSSIBLE HUYEN PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDUSYNFN 1975.

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15. BUDDHISTS ALSO CONTINUE, WITHOUT NOTABLE SUCCESS, ATTEMPT TO PRESENT CONSISTENT POSITION ON CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS. OFFICE FOR PEACE AND RECONCILIATION RECENTLY ESTABLISHED IN VIEN HOA DAO (VHD-HIGH SECULAR COUNCIL). ACCORDING SEN TRAN QUANG THUAN, THIS DESIGNED ASSURE MAU'S NRF DOES NOT HAVE CLEAR FIELD SPEAK FOR BUDDHIST COMMUNITY ON THESE MATTERS. OFFICE INCLUDES VENERABLES TRI QUANG, THIEN MINH AND HUYEN QUANG GIVING BALANCE TO NON-ACTIVISTS; ACCORDING PRESS REPORTS, HUYEN QUANG WILL ACT AS HEAD OF OFFICE. ON OCT 6, HUYEN QUANG ANNOUNCED HIS NEW OFFICE TO CAMPAIGN FOR PEACE. IN ANSWER TO QUESTION OF WHETHER BUDDHIST CHURCH SHOULD SEEK A UNION WITH OTHERS AGAINST CORRUPTION BEFORE ENDING OF WAR, HUYEN QUANG ACCORDING TO PRESS REPLIED, "AT PRESENT, THE WAR STILL CONTINUES, SO EVILS CAN HARDLY BE EXTERMINATED." IT SEEMS LIKELY SEN MAU WISHES MOVE BUDDHISTS GOOD DEAL FASTER AND FURTHER INTO PROTEST MOVEMENT THAN INFLUENTIAL MEMBERS VHD WILL ACCEPT. SUBSTANTIAL OPPOSITION AMONG BUDDHIST CHURCH AND LAY LEADERS TO SUCH BUDDHIST ACTIVISM ALSO CONFIRMED BY OTHER EMB SOURCES, AND WE BELIEVE EFFECTIVE JOINT ACTION BY BUDDHISTS AND OTHER OPPOSITION MOVEMENTS UNLIKELY.

16. IN RECENT WEEKS, NUMEROUS SMALL MINI-DEMONSTRATIONS HAVE BEEN HELD IN SAIGON, PACM MEETINGS HAVE BEEN HELD IN CAM RANH, NHA TRANG, GIA DINH AND ELSEWHERE, AND CONSIDERABLE HULLABALOO IN STREETS, INCLUDING BURNING OF CONFISCATED PAPERS, HAS TAKEN PLACE. GOVERNMENT CONTCEMUES CAREFUL POLICY OF ATTEMPTING CONTAIN SUCH DEMONSTRATIONS, FOR INSTANCE, BY BLOCKING ACCESS BY CASUAL BYSTANDERS WHILE AVOIDING VIOLENCE EVEN UNDER RATHER EXTREME PROVOCATION. RESULT HAS BEEN EFFECTIVE IN KEEPING DEMONSTRATIONS LOW KEY AND UNEMOTIONAL.

17. COMMENT: MOST OF THE DEMONSTRATIONS DESCRIBED ABOVE HAVE MET LITTLE OR NO POPULAR SUPPORT. PACM HAS, HOWEVER, ATTRACTED SOME LARGE AUDIENCES AT MASS MEETINGS IN CHURCHES, AND WE EXPECT DEMONSTRATIONS AND AGITATION TO CONTINUE. MAJOR POLITICAL FIGURES WITH SUBSTANTIAL FOLLOWINGS OR INFLUENCE IN POLITICAL OR RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS CONTINUED TO BOSERVE THE SITUATION FROM SIDELINES. AT THE SAME TIME, MANY POLITICIANS NOW BEGIN TO SEE THE POSSIBILITY OF A REAL ELECTORAL CONTEST IN 1975. THEY ARE DOUBTLESS MULLING HOW THEY AND THEIR GROUPS

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CAN BEST TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE SITUATION IN PREPARATION FOR THE TWO ELECTIONS WHICH LOOM NEXT YEAR.

18. WE DOUBT THAT PRESIDENT THIEU COULD HAVE DESIGNED A SPEECH THAT WOULD HAVE SATISFIED FATHER THANH AND THE EXTREMIST OPPOSITION, WHOSE DEMANDS HAVE BECOME INCREASINGLY SWEEPING AND OPEN-ENDED. DESPITE FATHER THANH'S DISCLAIMERS OF AN INTENTION TO FORCE PRESIDENT THIEU TO RESIGN, IT SEEMS APPARENT THAT THIS IN FACT IS HIS PURPOSE. THIEU'S OCTOBER 1 SPEECH DID NOT HOWEVER REALLY SATISFY HIS OWN SUPPORTERS EITHER. MANY OF THESE HAVE LONG BEEN CRITICAL OF THE INADEQUACY OF STEPS TAKEN TO CONTROL CORRUPTION. MOREOVER, HOANG DUC NHA'S WHOLLY UNSATISFACTORY PERFORMANCE AS MINISTER OF INFORMATION AND PRIVILEGED POSITION NHA HAS ASSUMED IN THE ADMINISTRATION HAS CAUSED GREAT DISCONTENT IN THE BUREAUCRACY. EVEN AMONG HIGH-
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ATTACK ON PROBLEMS
WITHIN THE MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT. AMONG BOTH CIVILIANS AND MILITARY MEN, REMOVAL OF NHA IS MOST COMMONLY MENTIONED AS A FIRST ESSENTIAL STEP.

19. BY HIS PUBLIC PROMISE TO AMEND THE PRESS AND POLITICAL PARTY LAWS AND HIS QUIET ASSURANCES TO TRAN QUOC BUU TO LIBERALIZE THE NO-STRIKE LAW, PRES THIEU HAS SIGNALLED HIS INTENTION TO CONCILIATE THE OPPOSITION WITH MEASURES LIBERALIZATION TO MEET THEIR LEGITIMATE DEMANDS. BY SO DOING, HE PROBABLY HOPES TO PLACATE THE RESPONSIBLE OPPOSITION GROUPS IN THE COUNTRY AND THUS REMOVE THE DANGER THAT THEY MIGHT JOINING FORCES WITH THE ANTI-CORRUPTION MOVEMENT OF FR. THANH OR THE NATIONAL RECONCILIATION FORCES OF SENATOR VU VAN MAU.

20. RUMORS ARE NOW HEARD EVERYWHERE THAT THE PRES WILL REORGANIZE THE CABINET AND POSSIBLY MAKE CHANGES AMONG MR COMMANDERS AND PROVINCE CHIEFS. WE UNDERSTAND THAT SOME CHANGES IN THE
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CABINET WILL PROBABLY BE ANNOUNCED SOON, AND THAT THE DROPPING OF HOANG DUC NHA HAS BEEN DECIDED UPON. THOUGH OTHER DETAILS

ARE NOT KNOWN, SUCH A MOVE WOULD REDUCE THE POLITICAL TEMPERATURE AND WOULD GREATLY ENCOURAGE AND REASSURE THE PRESIDENT'S NUMEROUS SUPPORTERS IN THE GOVERNMENT, THE ARMY AND AMONG THE POPULATION. IT WILL NOT HOWEVER STILL AGITATION BY EXTREMIST OPPOSITION.

21. OVER THE LONGER TERM POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN SVN WILL DEPEND AT LEAST AS MUCH ON EXTERNAL FACTORS AS ON THE WISDOM OF THE GOVERNMENT'S POLICIES AND ITS ADROITNESS IN HANDLING THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION. THE PRESENT VERY REAL AND SERIOUS ECONOMIC AND MILITARY SITUATIONS, WHICH HAVE BEEN ENORMOUSLY EXACERBATED BY CONGRESSIONAL CUTS IN AID TO VIETNAM, ARE AT THE ROOT OF THE CURRENT PROTEST MOVEMENTS. SINCE THE SIGNING OF THE PARIS AGREEMENT IN JANUARY 1973 THE REAL INCOME OF GVN CIVILIAN AND MILITARY EMPLOYEES HAS BEEN REDUCED BY FROM 35 PERCENT TO 40 PERCENT (WITH FAMILIES THIS IS NEARLY ONE-THIRD OF THE POPULATION) AND UNEMPLOYMENT HAS STEADILY MOUNTED. DURING THIS SAME PERIOD EARLIER HOPES FOR A GRADUAL CESSATION OF FIGHTING HAVE BEEN DESTROYED BY STEPPED UP NORTH VIETNAMES ATTACKS, AND MILITARY AND CIVILIAN CASUALTIES CONTINUE TO BRING GRIEF TO FAMILIES THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY. IN THESE CIRCUMSTANCES IT IS NOT SURPRISING THAT THERE IS SOME VOCAL DISCONTENT WITH THE GOVERNMENT; IT IS ONLY SURPRISING THAT THERE IS NOT MORE.
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NOTE BY OC/T: SAIGON 13059 SECTION 2 OF 2 TEXT GARBLED.
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